

# Implementing Service-Learning in Undergraduate Adapted Physical Education

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*This course provides hands-on experience to students and a valuable service to the community.*

Service-learning (SL) is a growing strategy used in academic classes to address human and community needs in a way that relates to an academic field, to promote civic and social responsibility, and to encompass a reciprocal university-community relationship (Hendricks & Miranda, 2003). For over 30 years, SL has provided an important link between universities and their surrounding communities (Watson, Hueglin, Crandell, & Eisenman, 2002), and the inclusion of SL in curriculums at institutions of higher education has increased dramatically in the last ten years (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Although SL has been included in several higher education kinesiology or physical education curriculums and appears to be increasing in number (Watson et al., 2002), many introductory classes in adapted physical education/activity (APE) typically offer an “on campus laboratory experience” with youths with disabilities rather than “real world” SL experiences. By incorporating SL into the APE curriculum, faculty can advance the reform in pedagogical kinesiology to a more applied and relevant educational experience. Some research indicates that hands-on experience, gained through SL, can improve student’s perceptions of individuals with disabilities (Hardin, 2005). Student’s grades have also been shown to improve as a result of students’ enhanced understanding of the course content (Moser & Rogers, 2005; Strange, 2004). However, the primary benefit of SL is the positive impact it can have on people with disabilities living in the community (Watson et al., 2002).

Service-learning has been used to give students out-of-classroom learning opportunities in numerous fields of study, including occupational therapy, medicine, and physical education (Wells, & Grabert, 2004). However, since there are no clear guidelines regarding how to implement SL in an undergraduate APE class, the purpose of this article is to present information that will help educators to include SL in their curriculum. This article first provides information about SL and its benefits and then presents a step-by-step guide to implementing SL in an undergraduate APE class.

## What Is Service-Learning?

Service-learning incorporates aspects of both volunteer work and internships. Volunteers are primarily distinguished by not expecting or receiving remuneration for their work, and they view service as a leisure or an extracurricular activity with fewer obligations (Doherty, Patterson, & Van Bussel, 2004). A volunteer’s focus is entirely on serving an agency (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Volunteer work is not performed for academic benefits, and volunteers are not responsible for reporting their academic

Teacher candidates (above) lead a variety of physical activities at “Challenge Air,” an annual event for children with disabilities, held at a Dallas airfield.

Photo by Simon Driver



Physical activity booths at the “Challenge Air” event include modified bowling and the parachute.

progress (e.g., supervisor evaluation) or their experience (e.g., midterm and final reflection logs) related to the placement. Another form of service similar to SL is an internship, which requires collaboration between the university, an agency, and the student. Students participating in an internship are expected to report their experiences to the classroom instructor and to apply the classroom curriculum to their work. Although interns are not always paid for their work, internships are also usually considered an apprenticeship, which sometimes offers monetary compensation. Internships are not service-based but are implemented to provide work experience for the student (Prentice & Garcia, 2000).

Service-learning is unique in that it combines academic study with community service and intentionally integrates the learning with service (Simons & Clearly, 2005). The application of classroom knowledge during SL provides reciprocal benefits to the service recipient and the student. Service-learning emphasizes the additional educational component (e.g., classroom material applied to service), requires additional agency cooperation, and provides university faculty with a practical application activity for their students to reach their educational goals. For example, to fulfill the SL component of an APE course, a student may choose to help a local physical education teacher in meeting the needs of his or her students with disabilities. The student will apply the principles taught in the classroom—such as equipment modification, person-first terminology, and knowledge of individuals' disabilities—while actively providing assistance to the individuals. During and after completing the SL component, the student will report his or her experiences and progress to the instructor in a reflective log. This system benefits the students, the agencies, and the faculty.

**Student Benefits.** Exposure to the SL environment provides a different learning approach to students taking an undergraduate APE class. Research indicates that student teachers exposed to SL in undergraduate classes (not specifically pedagogical kinesiology classes) gain a deeper comprehension of classroom curriculum than if the class only consisted of a traditional lecture format (Strange, 2004). Student teachers taking classes with additional SL components also scored

higher grades than students taking the same course without the SL component.

Students also gain an opportunity to apply classroom curriculum in a practical setting, thus increasing the relevance of the course (Hardin, 2005). Consequently, it is suggested that SL activities bridge the gap between theory and practice (LaMaster, 2001). For example, students providing adapted physical activity to a client at a rehabilitation center will be able to apply classroom material, such as knowledge of health impairments, handling, and activity modifications, to better meet the individual's unique needs.

Another benefit of SL in an APE class is that it exposes students to new careers or fields of study. Research suggests that SL activities including hands-on field experiences have the potential to positively influence career decisions (LaMaster, 2001). For students who are undecided about their future career, direct contact with individuals with disabilities may encourage them to pursue a career working with a special population.

**Agency Benefits.** Agencies that provide service to individuals with disabilities can benefit from the additional human resources supplied by the undergraduate students fulfilling the SL component of their APE course. If the unique needs of individuals with disabilities are to be successfully met, then specialized services are often required. Through SL, students can provide additional care, supervision, and activities that agencies might not be able to otherwise supply to individuals with disabilities.

**Faculty Benefits.** One benefit of implementing SL in an undergraduate APE class is that it might give faculty members opportunities to further their research efforts (Chabot & Hoben, 2003). For instance, a faculty member may identify a successful program that a local agency is providing to individuals with disabilities and may decide to research and publish data on the effectiveness of the program or on the changes in attitudes of the undergraduate students toward individuals with disabilities (e.g., Kozub, 2002).

Another faculty benefit is the additional learning method provided by SL to meet the objectives of the course (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Through SL, students participate in hands-

on activities that are not offered during typical classroom lectures. Hands-on experience is an additional teaching method that faculty can implement to increase their students' subject knowledge. Research has shown that SL can enhance and increase students' cultural awareness, problem-solving ability, interdisciplinary learning, and ability to think critically (Chabot & Holben, 2003).

In addition, implementing SL can facilitate student-faculty relationships (Chabot & Holben, 2003). Through frequent interactions and class discussions with students, faculty can identify students' strengths and weaknesses and provide academic challenges to meet their individual needs. Faculty will also have additional opportunities to provide encouragement and direction to students in order to ensure that they are successfully meeting the unique needs of individuals with disabilities.

Another benefit is the increased connection to the community. As a result of implementing SL in courses, faculty will be in contact with agencies providing services to individuals with disabilities. Through communication with agencies, families, and individuals with disabilities, the course instructor will have an increased awareness of current community issues (Moser & Rogers, 2005).

Service-learning clearly benefits everyone involved in the program. The next section discusses five key steps that instructors must take to include SL successfully in their curriculum (see [www.cps.unt.edu/sl/index.html](http://www.cps.unt.edu/sl/index.html) for a sample curriculum).

## Practical Steps for Introducing Service-Learning in an APE Class

*Step 1: Determine Learning Objectives and Goals.* The following questions may help you define your learning objectives:

1. What do I want my students to learn from the service-learning activity?
2. Is SL relevant to my classroom curriculum?
3. How will this task help my students learn?
4. How will the community benefit?
5. How do I grade SL, and what percentage of the student's grade will it be?
6. What materials will my students need? Who will provide the materials?

*Step 2: Contact the Service-Learning Center at the University.* It is the responsibility of the SL center to provide assistance to faculty implementing SL into their curriculum. The SL center may be within the center for public service or college of public affairs and community service at your university. The SL center should have a web page within the university site that includes information about SL at your institution and whom to contact should you need assistance. The available resources include contact lists for appropriate agencies, development of forms, and instructions for web page creation. Your SL center may also have information about small grants that are available to support the development of the SL component in your curriculum. If your campus does not currently have an SL center, then additional resources will

be needed to assist you. For example, other faculty within your department or college may be able to provide guidance for your SL component.

*Step 3: Contact Agencies.* The next step is to establish community partnerships with local agencies that will provide your students with their SL opportunities. Your campus SL center may have a list of appropriate agencies that are currently partners with your university. Additional agencies can be found through a quick Internet search or in a local phone book. While investigating an agency, it is critical to determine whether the agency is able to provide curriculum-related service opportunities to the students. It is also important that each agency understands its role and is willing to provide service opportunities. Agencies that are unable to meet the requirements may not be suitable for SL placements.

*Step 4: Create Student Paperwork for the SL Assignment.* Acquiring proper task sheets is the next step. Task sheets are instruments that have the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the SL component. These may include (1) a risk sheet, (2) class contract, (3) agency list, (4) timesheet, (5) supervisor evaluation, (6) midterm reflection log, and (7) a final reflection log.

1. The risk assumption form is a legal document that explains that SL requires students to participate in off-campus activities. It also explains, in legal language, that the student assumes any and all risks from participating in SL. The SL center at the university will have a template of this form, and all students must complete and return the risk assumption form before their SL can begin.

2. The class contract is an agreement between the student and the agency that clearly states the role of both student and supervisor. It should list (1) the student's name, (2) the course title, (3) the instructor's name, (4) the semester, (5) the student's duties (e.g., hands-on experience with individuals with disabilities), and (6) the starting date of service. The purpose, objectives, and expectations of the student and agency should be clearly outlined. For example, the students may be expected to (1) work at their highest ability, (2) engage in meaningful tasks related to the class content and objectives, and (3) complete and return task sheets prepared by faculty. The agency is expected to promote student learning by (1) providing requisite information, training, and assistance that will help the student to provide optimal service; (2) providing meaningful service opportunities to the student; (3) providing helpful feedback and supervision of students; (4) respecting the dignity, skills, and individual needs of the student; and (5) completing appropriate paperwork provided by the student. A mutual agreement between the student and the agency's supervisor should be clearly defined in the class contract and signed by both the student and the agency supervisor. It is also important to consider the confidentiality of the individual(s) the student will be working with. Different agencies may have their own training, expectations, or paperwork in place to ensure confidentiality.

3. The agency list provides students with placement contact information including (1) the address of the agency,

Figure 1. Student Time Sheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Course \_\_\_\_\_  
 Placement Site \_\_\_\_\_

Date	Duties/Tasks	Time In	Time Out	# of Hrs	Hrs to date	Supervisor Signature

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Total # of Hours \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm the number of hours listed above is accurate: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Site Supervisor

Figure 2. Supervisor Evaluation Form

Supervisor Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Was the student punctual (on time)?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes ☐

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Was the student dressed appropriately?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes ☐

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did the student participate appropriately and professionally (e.g., interact, give assistance, get involved with direct instruction)?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes ☐

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Did the student reach the class and agency goals and objectives?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes ☐

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Would you accept the student to complete their service-learning again?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Sometimes ☐

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

6. How would you rate the person overall?

← \_\_\_\_\_ →  
 1 (Poor) 2 3 4 5 (Satisfactory) 6 7 8 9 10 (Excellent)

7. Other comments. Did the student do anything well or poorly?

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



(2) agency requirements (e.g., background checks), (3) times available for students to provide service, and (4) any additional pertinent information. Each item is essential for the students to determine whether the agency meets their individual needs.

4. Student time sheets (figure 1) track the amount of hours completed at the SL placement. It should be tabulated with rows and columns to clearly indicate the location and amount of time spent providing a service. The time sheet should also include a supervisor signature to verify that the hours were completed.

5. The supervisor evaluation form (figure 2) is used to assess the student's performance at the SL placement. The supervisor evaluation form should include a Likert scale that rates the student from 0 (poor) to 10 (excellent) on variables such as attendance and punctuality, professional behavior, appropriate attire, ability to reach the goals and objectives of the agency, and overall performance. Finally, a section should be available for any general comments the supervisor may have about the student. The faculty member or teaching assistant can also be responsible for completing the evaluation after observing the student, especially if the supervisor has a heavy client load.

6. The midterm reflective log is a tool to help students think critically about their SL experience. Questions given in the midterm reflective log need to be specific and student-focused. Examples of questions could include (1) "What did you do well?" (2) "What did you do poorly?" and (3) "What will you change, and how will you change it?" By completing the midterm reflective log, students evaluate their performance and determine what changes need to be made to improve their experience and service delivery.

7. The final reflective log is similar in form to the midterm reflection log because its overall purpose is to stimulate students' critical thinking about their SL experience. Examples of questions for the final reflection log may include (1) "What would you do differently if you were to work with people with disabilities in the future?" and (2) "What are three lessons that you will take with you from this experience?"

**Step 5: Incorporating Service-Learning into Your Syllabus.** It is up to the instructor to determine what percentage of the student's grade the assignment should account for. The items that can be graded in the SL assignment include the time sheet, midterm reflection log, final reflection log, and supervisor evaluation form. The weight of the tests, quizzes, attendance, and additional assignments will need to be adjusted to include SL in the student's final grade.

Other questions to consider are how many hours of SL should be required during the semester and when it should be used. Some research recommends that 15 to 20 hours of service is most efficient over the span of a long semester (Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002). While some instructors may require their students to participate in SL throughout the semester, others may want to incorporate SL only during a particular topic (e.g., developmental disabilities), for a specific population (e.g., children, adults), or for fewer hours.

## Summary

Service-learning in an undergraduate APE class provides learning opportunities that otherwise would not be available in a class using a traditional lecture format or "on-campus laboratory experience." Thus, SL provides students, faculty, and the community with a variety of benefits. Students seeking teacher certification will also gain invaluable experience that will help them prepare to work with students with disabilities. If SL is appropriately incorporated into an undergraduate APE course, the learning experience of the student will be enhanced and the unique needs of the individual with a disability will be effectively met.

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